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32 Spies Watch U.S. Plant Unmolested

While the Soviets have shot an unarmed American army officer for photographing military equipment in East Germany, the United States has left 32 known Soviet agents unmolested as they observe and take pictures of one of the most sensitive defense facilities in this country.

The Soviet spies concentrate on a 50-square-mile area in the Mojave Desert near Lancaster and Palmdale, Calif., 60 miles northeast of downtown Los Angeles. The FBI's counterintelligence people know who the spies are and what they are doing, but do no more than keep them under constant surveillance.

The situation is too much for one furious FBI source. "Here we have deep-cover people that we know are doing all the photographic work and spying on these classified facilities, doing it every way they possibly can," he told us. "And we do nothing but monitor, at the same time as we've got a guy who takes a couple of photographs in East Germany and gets killed."

What's so interesting to Soviet spies in the sun-baked California desert? A sprawling industrial area called U.S. Air Force Plant 42. Its corporate tenants manufacture, test and overhaul some of the nation's most secret aircraft, including super-secret spy planes and the B1 bomber.

"This is a very active facility, which was put there by the Air Force specifically for the building and test flying of military airplanes," said a source at Lockheed, one of the defense contractors housed at Plant 42. The companies have their own security forces to keep intruders out of their areas, but

Plant 42's runways "are plainly visible from the public highway that passes along the edge of the facility," he said.

"As you know," the Lockheed man added, "at almost any military base in the United States, anybody who wants to take pictures of what's going on at that base from outside the base boundaries doesn't have much difficulty doing so."

Lockheed's Advanced Development Projects section is at Plant 42. It's known as the "Skunk Works," after the Dogpatch still that made powerful Kickapoo Joy Juice for Li'l Abner's friends.

The Skunk Works has produced the Air Force's three most secret reconnaissance planes: the U2, SR71 and TR1. The TR1 is still being built there, while another facility is used to modify and overhaul all three aircraft.

The Soviets have a special reason to want information on the SR71, also known as the Blackbird. They've been trying to shoot it down ever since it replaced the U2 in the 1960s, after the downing of U.S. pilot Francis Gary Powers. But the SR71, which can fly three times the speed of sound at 80,000 feet and higher, has survived more than 900 Soviet bloc attempts to nail it.

Plant 42 is the home of other secret projects. Rockwell International, for example, is building the B1 and the space shuttle at Plant 42. Northrop is working on the Navy's F5 fighter nearby.

So why doesn't the FBI put the collar on the 32 Soviet spies it has identified lurking around Plant 42? Our disgusted FBI source said the counterintelligence squad follows the rule, "Better the devil you know than the devil you don't."